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Illinois and Michigan Canal

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The Need for Better Transportation

As soon as he could produce more food than he needed for survival, and especially as he moved inland from navigable streams, the pioneer became an advocate of internal improvements, a term synonymous with better transportation. He had reached his home by boat in the high-water season and by wagon after the spring rains stopped, and soon he needed a relatively cheap and convenient means of moving bulky agricultural products to a town from which they could be transported to distant markets. There, in increasing volume, the settler needed to make purchases of staples and manufactured articles whose cost would depend to a considerable degree upon transportation expenses.

Illinois: A History of the Prairie State
Robert P. Howard



Building The Illinois and Michigan Canal

The success of the eastern water canals in the early nineteenth century provided the impetus for developing canal transportation in Illinois. Plans for

connecting Lake Michigan to the inland waterways of Illinois had been proposed since the end of the War of 1812, but the northern half of the state had only a nominal population until after the final removal of the Indians in 1836.

In 1822 the United States Congress had granted a right-of-way through northern Illinois, and the state made several surveys and engineering studies preparatory to a canal. New towns such as Chicago and Ottawa were platted in anticipation of the new internal developments.

Despite the clamoring from the southern counties and the possible competition from another new form of transportation—railroads—canal construction began at Bridgeport (Chicago) on July 4, 1836. The state soon became mired in financial difficulties, and in 1842 construction was stopped. Management of the canal was reorganized, and a new loan was secured. Though hampered by financing delays, floods, and sickness and accidents among the workmen, the canal was finished and opened to traffic on April 23, 1848.

The Illinois and Michigan Canal was completed in twelve years, using hand tools and black powder. The canal was 96 miles in length from Chicago to Peru, 60 feet wide at the surface, 36 feet at the bottom, and 6 feet deep. It had 5 tributaries, 15 locks and spanned 25 bridges. Trade basins were constructed at Lockport, Joliet, Channahon, Ottawa, and LaSalle.

The canal cost \$6.5 million and was an immediate success. The revenues generated from the tolls and the sale of canal lands and lots helped the state remain solvent. The influence of the canal on the commercial and industrial development of Chicago was immeasurable.

The advent of the railroad ushered in a new era of transportation for the country and serious competition for the canal. The profitable passenger business was first to abandon the canal and later the higher-class freight would also opt for the speedier mode of transportation.

Though never the great source of revenue it was projected to be, the canal was instrumental in developing an entire region and a great city.



How an Illinois and Michigan Canal Lock Worked

Boats entered or left an I & M Canal lock through two large wooden gates that opened like double doors at either end of the lock. But the water that raised or lowered boats within the lock flowed through the smaller iron valve gates. There was one such valve gate in the bottom quarter of each of the four large wooden gates on an I & M Canal lock.

When "locking through" a boat approaching from upstream, the locktender began with the large wooden gates at the lock's downstream end closed and those at the upstream end wide open. After the boat moved into the lock, the locktender closed the upstream gates behind it. He then opened the downstream valve gates, allowing gravity to drain water from the lock chamber into the downstream pool. Within a few minutes, the water level inside the lock chamber was the same as that downstream from the lock, and the locktender could close the valve gates and open the large downstream gates, enabling the boat to leave the lock. When "locking through" a boat approaching from downstream, the locktender simply reversed the process and allowed water to enter the lock from the upstream level via the two valve gates located in the upstream lock gates.

Historic Illinois December 1979
Mary Yeater Rathbun

Travel on the Illinois and Michigan Canal

Arthur Cunynghame, a British army officer stationed in Canada, obtained a few weeks' leave of absence for the purpose of making a tour of the United States. Cunynghame embarked on the canal boat the "Queen of the Prairies", October 12, 1850 at 5 P.M., enroute to LaSalle, 96 miles from Chicago. Cunynghame's rare and interesting narrative gives the reader a personal and rather humorous description of travel on an I & M canal boat. This mode of transportation lasted only a short period of time until the railroads offered faster and more comfortable transportation.

. . . The cabin of this canal boat was about 50 feet in length, 9 feet wide, and 7 feet high. We numbered about ninety passengers within this confined space, in which we were to sleep, eat, and live; the nominal duration of our passage was twenty hours, but it eventually proved to be twenty-five; our baggage was secured on the roof of the boat, and covered with canvass, to screen it from the effects of the weather. A sort of divan surrounded the cabin, the portion appropriated to the ladies being screened off during the night with a curtain.

For the first few miles we, in company with three more canal boats, were towed by a small steamer, but having passed the locks, not very distant from Chicago, three horses were attached, which towed us smoothly along at the rate of five miles an hour.

Soon after we had started, tea with its accompaniments made its appearance, the never-failing beef-steak being as tough as usual. As soon as this was disposed of, all the male passengers were ordered on deck, while the parlour should be transformed into a bed-room; in less than half-an-hour we received permission to return, in which short time no less than fifty sleeping places in this small space had been rigged up, and twenty more spread upon the floor; the remainder of the passengers, about twenty in number, for the most part children, being detailed off to share their tenements with their pa's and ma's. These sleeping-places consisted of shelves placed three deep, the entire length of the cabin, on either side, with a height of two feet between each. . . .

Into these berths we were ordered to get; and after some difficulty, especially amongst those to whom this mode of travelling was new, we obeyed; the remainder of the passengers, selecting their locations in succession, according to the number on their tickets.

I soon became insensible to the uncomfortable position which I occupied, although, only six inches above my face a tremendous man threatened every moment to burst through the sacking which supported him; and had the cords given way, I felt I must have been squeezed as flat as a pancake.

With so many passengers in so confined a space, no wonder that on the following morning I should awake with a severe headache, the effect of the heated nauseous vapours which surrounded us. Not a window was permitted to be opened; I made various endeavors to break through this rule during the night, but every window within my reach was fastened down. This, however, may be considered but a wise precaution; for the malaria from the surrounding marshy land, and especially from Mud Lake, distant about fifteen miles from Chicago, which we passed within a very short distance, is very dangerous. . . .

At six P.M., we reached LaSalle; here is the termination of the Illinois Canal, and the navigable portion of the Illinois River.

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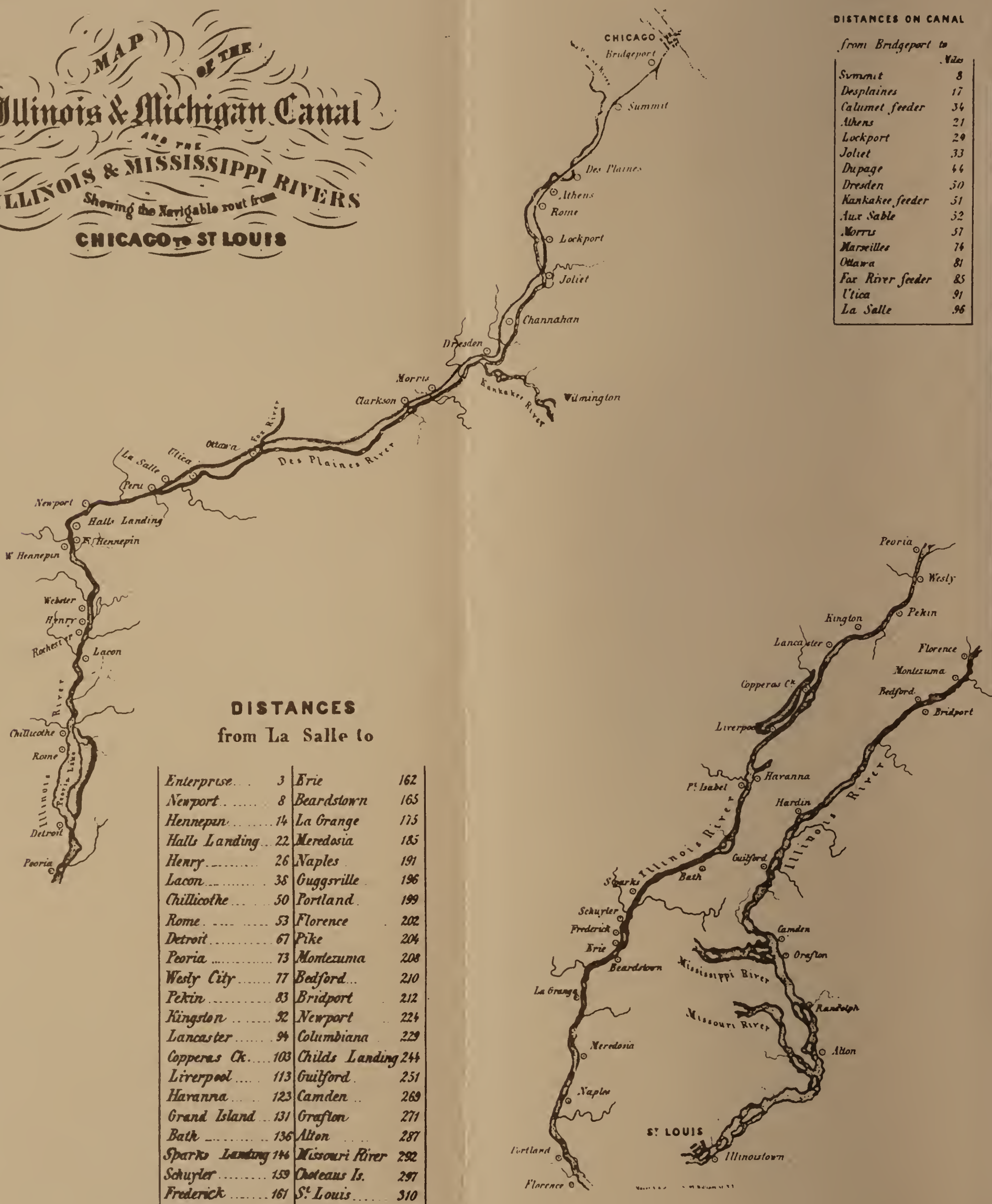
For Scheduling Information on the Illinois and Michigan Canal Traveling Exhibit, contact: Stephen Leonard, Office of Public Affairs, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, Old State Capitol, Springfield, IL 62701, (217) 782-4836.

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MAP OF THE ILLINOIS & MICHIGAN CANAL AND THE ILLINOIS & MISSISSIPPI RIVERS Showing the Navigable route from CHICAGO to ST LOUIS

DISTANCES ON CANAL

from Bridgeport to	Miles
Summit	8
Desplaines	17
Calumet feeder	34
Athens	21
Lockport	29
Joliet	33
Dupage	44
Dresden	50
Kankakee feeder	51
Aux Sable	52
Morris	57
Marxelles	74
Ottawa	81
For River feeder	85
Utica	91
La Salle	96



DISTANCES from La Salle to

Enterprise	3	Erie	162
Newport	8	Beardstown	165
Hennepin	14	La Grange	175
Halls Landing	22	Meredonia	185
Henry	26	Naples	191
Lacon	38	Guggsville	196
Chillicothe	50	Portland	199
Rome	53	Florence	202
Detroit	67	Pike	204
Peoria	73	Montezuma	208
West City	77	Bedford	210
Pekin	83	Bridport	212
Kingston	92	Newport	224
Lancaster	94	Columbiana	229
Copperas Ck.	103	Childs Landing	244
Liverpool	113	Guilford	251
Havanna	123	Camden	269
Grand Island	131	Grafton	271
Bath	136	Alton	287
Sparks Landing	146	Missouri River	292
Schuyler	159	Choteaus Is.	297
Frederick	161	St. Louis	310

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